

Advanced Learners' Intercultural Experience Through Computer-Enhanced Technology: A Study of Polish and Romanian Students

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Abstract In today's globalized world, the development of intercultural competence, which includes concepts such as cultural knowledge, curiosity about "otherness", intercultural sensitivity and openness to other cultures, is considered one of the basic objectives of education, including foreign language (L2) education. Computer-based technologies, embracing various forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), appear to be particularly useful in promoting an intercultural approach, as they provide L2 users with opportunities to access cultural information and engage in authentic intercultural exchanges with other L2 users. The article reports the findings of a study that investigated whether and to what extent advanced EFL learners, English majors from Poland and Romania, made use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance their intercultural experience. The results indicate declared high levels of ICT use to get information about the culture of English-speaking countries, but also enhanced interest in other cultures, openness to cultural differences and willingness to communicate with foreigners through CMC. On the basis of the findings, conclusions are drawn about the potential benefits of online experience for the development of L2 learners' intercultural awareness, although intercultural training within formal instruction is needed to better prepare learners for pursuing intercultural competence development through online resources.

Keywords Intercultural competence • Intercultural experience • Information and communication technology • Culture teaching • English as a foreign language

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1 Introduction

Becoming interculturally competent is a vital requirement for modern citizens and qualified professionals in the contemporary multicultural world. Due to the rapid pace of advancements in digital technology, the emergence of international media, and international academic and business cooperation, individuals nowadays need to be able to communicate effectively with people from other cultures. Only in this way will they be able to accommodate to the demands of an increasingly interconnected world and to participate in the global marketplace (Espinar et al. 2012; Perry and Southwell 2011; Sercu 2005). In order to succeed in this, they need to develop intercultural competence, defined as “the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures” (Perry and Southwell 2011: 455). In addition, in order to effectively communicate in intercultural situations, one needs to be a competent user of foreign languages; therefore, incorporating an intercultural approach into L2 education (and, particularly, into the teaching of English, which is the primary means of international communication today), seems especially adequate (Young and Sachdev 2011). Therefore, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners need to receive intercultural training in classroom-based activities as well as take advantage of opportunities for intercultural experiences outside the classroom, through visits abroad or through technology, as since the 1990s, the development of computer-based technology has made communication and mediation among individuals from different cultures considerably easier (Blake 2008; Kramsch 2011; O’Dowd 2007; van Compernelle and Williams 2009; Youngs et al. 2011).

Computer-enhanced technology is a valuable source of cultural information for L2 learners, as through various applications they gain access to literature, video, and online media which provide information about customs, lifestyles, or cultural representations; moreover, the Internet creates opportunities for L2 learners to engage in intercultural online interactions with native and other non-native users of the target language. The beneficial effects of engaging in online intercultural projects are largely confirmed by research (Elola and Oskoz 2008; Schuetze 2008; Zeiss and Isabelli-García 2005). It also needs to be noted that the out-of-class intercultural experience that L2 learners engage in may also contribute to an increased willingness to communicate with foreigners, openness to other cultures and deepened intercultural understanding.

In the article, the findings of a study which focused on the usefulness of computer-enhanced technology in the process of developing intercultural competence in Polish and Romanian advanced learners of English as a foreign language will be presented and analyzed. First, however, a brief discussion of the role of technology in fostering intercultural L2 education will be provided.

2 The Role of Technology in Fostering an Intercultural Approach in L2 Education

Although the development of intercultural competence has always been considered a vital aim of L2 teaching, the understanding of the term 'intercultural competence', and, consequently, of the aims of intercultural education, have changed over the decades (Castro and Sercu 2005; Byrnes 2010; Scarino 2010; Sercu 2010). As Sercu (2010) further explains, while in the past intercultural education denoted primarily the acquisition of knowledge about the target language culture, nowadays, in addition to this, it encompasses a much wider scope of abilities which lead the learner toward participation in intercultural and multilingual communities. Scarino (2010) summarizes this change as a move from a cultural to an intercultural orientation in L2 teaching.

Scarino (2010: 324) goes on to explain that in the process of becoming interculturally competent, L2 learners "come to understand culture not only as information about diverse people and their practices but also, and most importantly, as the contextual framework that people use to exchange meaning in communication with others and through which they understand their social world". Sercu (2005: 2) lists the following abilities as characterizing an interculturally competent person: "the willingness to engage with the foreign culture, self-awareness and the ability to look upon oneself from the outside, the ability to see the world through the others' eyes, the ability to cope with uncertainty". In another article, Sercu (2010) defines an interculturally competent person as interested in other cultures, open-minded, non-judgmental about cultural differences, respectful for "otherness", empathetic and flexible. In defining the concept of intercultural competence, Byram et al. (2002) list three crucial components: knowledge (culture-general and culture-specific), skill (which involves interpretation and interaction abilities, metacognitive strategies used in discovering cross-cultural differences and adjusting to them), and attitudes (motivation, openness and willingness to learn about other cultures). According to Perry and Southwell (2011), the concept of intercultural understanding encompasses knowledge about one's own and other cultures, positive attitudes (respect, empathy and curiosity) toward other cultures, and an appreciation of differences among cultures. In their definitions, the conception of intercultural competence involves behavior and communication skills, and largely denotes "the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures" (Perry and Southwell 2011: 455). Hence, as highlighted by many researchers (Byram et al. 2002; Sercu 2010), intercultural communicative competence also involves the ability to use a foreign language appropriately in various intercultural situations.

Therefore, within the intercultural approach in L2 education, opportunities need to be created for all of these components to be fostered in learners, as the development of intercultural communicative competence is considered to be a vital aim of L2 teaching nowadays. Baker (2012: 66) highlights that in today's increasingly multilingual and multicultural world, where English has become the *lingua franca*

of intercultural communication among native as well as non-native users, the development of intercultural awareness is particularly significant “in expanding circle and global lingua franca contexts, in which cultural influences are likely to be varied, dynamic, and emergent”. According to the Council of Europe (2001), an L2 learner is expected to develop “interculturality” by combining their own language and cultural competence with knowledge about the “ways of acting and communicating” in other languages they learn. This, in turn, leads to the emergence of intercultural awareness, which denotes “greater openness to new cultural experiences”. Corbett (2003: 2) makes the point that within an intercultural approach to foreign language education, learners develop an ability “to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding”.

Acknowledging the need to incorporate intercultural education into L2 instruction, Belz (2007: 157), notices that “the classroom is an insufficiently rich learning environment with regard to opportunities for apprenticeship into the diverse and complex forms of linguistic behaviour that both index and constitute intercultural competence”. Similarly, Korhonen (2010) makes the point that very often in L2 classrooms the teaching of culture may be trivialized, neglected, or conducted in an artificial, teacher-centered way, providing learners with no real experience with other cultures. There are, of course, ways of applying appropriate teaching techniques in order to foster intercultural understanding and critical cultural awareness in learners, such as exposing them to various texts and cultural representations (Perry and Southwell 2011; Ware and Kramsch 2005), but these classroom-based activities would be more effective if supported by direct contact with other cultures, which would provide “experiential learning” experience (Byram et al. 2002; Byram and Feng 2004; Laskaridou and Sercu 2005). Staying abroad, for academic or leisure reasons, appears to be a particularly apt way of fostering an openness to other cultures. Even short visits appear to have beneficial effects on promoting intercultural sensitivity (Anderson et al. 2006; Behrnd and Porzelt 2012; Cadd 2012).

Since staying abroad is not always possible for a variety of reasons, another way of bringing L2 learners closer to other cultures is to provide cultural information in order to stimulate interest in them (Belz 2007). According to Levy (2009), technology makes it possible to become familiar with other cultures and deepen intercultural awareness in foreign language learners through both receptive and productive means. In terms of receptive means, various web sites give learners access to information about other cultures and provide them with relevant, authentic and up to date data. In terms of productive means, technology opens up numerous possibilities for learners to engage in CMC through informal online interactions, or intercultural collaboration projects. Furstenberg (2010: 329) makes the point that the use of the Internet has contributed to refreshed, more innovative ways of incorporating cultural elements in the teaching of foreign languages, “as it has brought the outside world right into our students’ homes and into our classrooms, providing students with direct and equal access to the complex, rich, and multifaceted world of the target culture via an abundance of texts, images, and videos”. As stressed by Thorne (2005: 2), the main power of Internet-mediated

intercultural foreign language education lies in that it makes it possible to support an exchange of ideas, opinions, and collaboration among learners who live in different cultures and in various locations on the globe. Similarly, O'Dowd (2007: 18) observes that since the Internet "is clearly becoming a setting for a great deal of intercultural contact and exchange", the opportunities offered by engaging in CMC (as a form of "online intercultural exchange") with other CMC users from various cultural backgrounds make it an authentic and relevant way of learning an L2 and its culture, and of realizing that L2 communication involves expressing one's cultural identity as well as opening up to other cultures. Leppänen et al. (2009: 1080) emphasize that in an increasingly multicultural world, new technologies create possibilities for young people to transcend their local identities and look for what is common to their generation, and, as a result, "[n]ational identity and language may have less significance here than shared interests, values, and ways of life".

Within a sociocultural approach to CMC research, researchers have focused on how CMC enhances L2 learners' intercultural competence and awareness. In Zeiss and Isabelli-García's (2005) study, American-Mexican CMC participation was found to influence learners' knowledge of the target language culture and to enhance their cultural awareness of several culture-related topics (such as current events, daily life, and educational systems); moreover, it positively influenced their willingness to study abroad. Schuetze (2008) investigated factors influencing the level of engagement in CMC dialogs between groups of Canadian and German students and the extent to which this engagement led to the development of intercultural communicative competence. It was found that those learners who asked wh-questions, shared personal information, provided examples, and were ready to look for materials that were not a part of the course, were most willing to learn by getting into contact with another culture and were most successful in online intercultural communication. Lee (2009) described a Spanish-American project based on social networking tools, the aim of which was to enhance learners' intercultural communication and awareness. The findings revealed the participants' positive attitudes toward online cultural exchange, enhanced levels of cross-cultural understanding and increased communication skills due to personal engagement. Similarly, Elola and Oskoz (2008) found cross-cultural blogging to have a very positive effect on the knowledge of the target language culture and perceptions about the target-language population. However, as noticed by many researchers (Blake 2008; van Compernelle and Williams 2009), intercultural CMC may also bring about communicative breakdowns resulting from insufficient cultural understanding. For example, Ware and Kramersch (2005) described a miscommunication episode in a classroom-based telecollaboration project between learners of German in the US and learners of English in Germany. According to the researchers, this example shows how much "culture is inescapably part of language as discourse, in other words, language is social semiotic practice" (Ware and Kramersch 2005: 202). It also sheds light on the fact that online participation in a multicultural community might pose a great challenge to L2 learners and their teachers, who are expected to function as cultural mediators.

3 The Aims of the Study

This study differed considerably from the other studies reported in the previous section, as it concentrated on learners' engagement in CMC in their free time, out of class, and not as part of classroom-based contact with L2 or any formally organized activity. Consequently, it did not focus on a single predetermined mode of CMC; since the learners' Internet use was not monitored by their teachers, the study focused on CMC in the general sense, with the underlying assumption that the learners used a variety of its modes and tools.

Generally, the study aimed to explore the potential benefits of CMC for stimulating the development of L2 learners' intercultural competence. The elements of intercultural competence within the scope of this study are understood as both the cultural knowledge dimension of becoming interculturally competent, and the attitudinal dimension of the process, i.e. pursuing interest in other cultures, seeking opportunities to interact online with other L2 users, and becoming more open and sensitive to cultural differences. Investigating these dimensions within a cross-cultural perspective, across two groups of participants from different cultures, for both of whom English was a foreign language, was considered a relevant factor in the study.

The particular aims of the study were formulated in order to contribute to a more comprehensive picture of the participants' development of intercultural competence as supported by intercultural use of computer-enhanced technology. One of the initial aims was to evaluate the intensity of the participants' (English majors) engaging in various forms of CMC in English. Moreover, the study aimed to investigate their declared use of Internet resources in order to explore their knowledge of the culture of English-speaking countries. Another aim was to investigate their perceptions of CMC as useful in developing intercultural competence; in other words, to see whether, according to the participants' own estimations, engagement in CMC helped them gain knowledge about and arouse interest in other cultures. Finally, the study's aim was to see whether there were differences in Internet-use habits and perceptions about its usefulness for developing intercultural competence between Polish and Romanian students.

4 Method

A total of 195 participants took part in the study, among them 167 females and 28 males. The participants were university students majoring in English in the 1st through 3rd years of a BA program. The mean age of the whole sample was 21.2, while the median age was 21 (min. 19, max. 31). The group of participants consisted of two subgroups: a group of Polish students from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań ($n = 149$), and a group of Romanian students from Vasile Alecsandri University in Bacau ($n = 46$). The participants' level of English was

upper-intermediate/advanced, and their mean length of learning the language was 12 years for the Polish students and 10 years for the Romanian students.

The tool used for data elicitation was a questionnaire administered to participants in pen-and-paper form. Apart from questions aimed at eliciting demographic information, the questionnaire comprised 11 questions which focused on eliciting data concerning the participants' contact with the culture of English-speaking countries and intercultural interactions with other users of English. Most of the questions, apart from the final one, which asked for additional comments, were closed-ended (either of a multiple choice or a ranking scale format). A *t*-test was applied to calculate the differences between the groups' responses. The questionnaire is enclosed in the Appendix.

5 Results

The first two questions concerned the participants' experiences visiting foreign countries. Figure 1 presents the number of countries the Polish and Romanian participants had visited in general, and Fig. 2 focuses on the number of times they had visited English-speaking countries. As can be seen from the figures, Polish students had traveled abroad more widely, as the most frequent answer, marked by 41 % of them, pointed to the range "more than 5 countries", while among the Romanian group, the most frequently chosen answer (by 44 %) was "between 1 and 2 countries".

Similarly, although in both groups the most frequent answer about the number of times the participants had visited English-speaking countries was "none" (55 % of the Polish and 76 % of the Romanian students), considerably more Polish than Romanian students ticked other answers.

In addressing the following questions, two participants in each group stated that they did not have steady access to the Internet, while the others did. All the

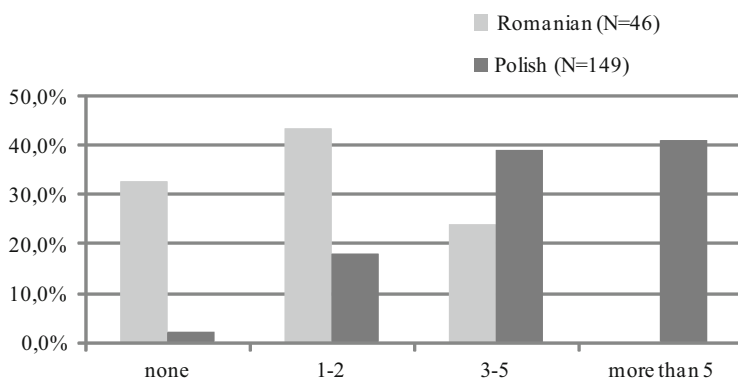


Fig. 1 The number of foreign countries the participants had visited

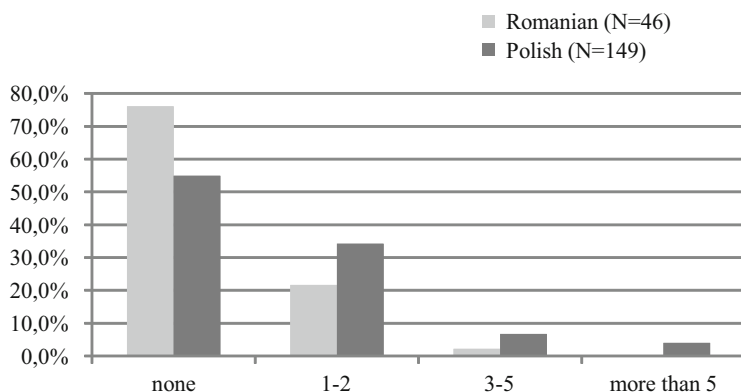


Fig. 2 The number of times the participants had been to English-speaking countries

participants said they used the Internet mainly at home. The Polish participants declared using the Internet on average for 2.3 h on weekdays and 3.2 h at weekends, while in the Romanian group the estimated average time spent surfing the Internet was slightly higher: 3.1 h on weekdays and 3.8 h at weekends.

Next, the participants were asked about the frequency of taking part in CMC in general, and in English. The most frequent answer concerning CMC use indicated by the sample as a whole was “every day”, with 60 % of the Polish and 46 % of the Romanian students providing this answer. In terms of the frequency of using English in CMC, the most frequent answer in both groups was “sometimes” (42 % of the Polish and 37 % of the Romanian students indicated this answer), while the total for the “often” and “very often” answers in both groups was 44 %. In terms of the particular forms of CMC the participants engaged in using English, a similar pattern was revealed in both groups, as the same three forms were ticked as the most frequently used: email (85 % Polish and 61 % Romanian students declared writing emails in English), instant messaging (indicated by 42 % of Polish and 44 % of Romanian students), and social networking sites (the use of which included English for 68 % of the Polish and 57 % of the Romanian students).

Figure 3 presents the mean scores of the participants’ declared frequency of engaging in online activities through which they could broaden their knowledge of the culture of English speaking countries. Here, the participants ticked their answers on a 5-point scale, in which 1 denoted never, 2—rarely, 3—sometimes, 4—often, and 5—very often. As can be seen from Fig. 3, watching movies in English was the activity in which most of the participants in both groups engaged most frequently, as the mean score for each of the groups oscillated between “often” and “very often”. Reading literature was next on the list, with the declared frequency falling between “sometimes” and “often”. Interacting with other users in English, both native and non-native speakers, appeared to be less frequently undertaken by the study participants, although the mean scores were around 3, which denoted the “sometimes” option.

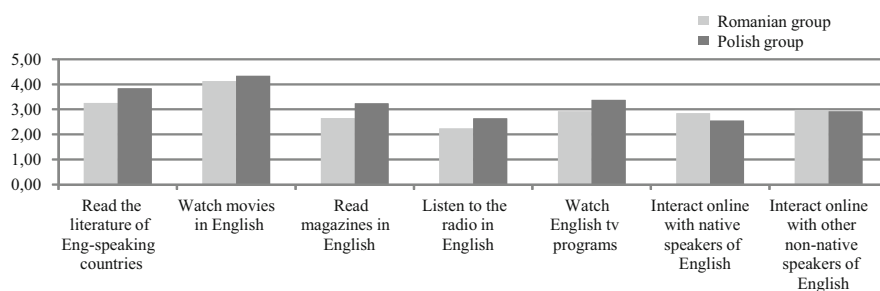


Fig. 3 The participants' declared frequency of engaging in online activities (1—never, 2—rarely, 3—sometimes, 4—often, 5—very often)

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and *t*-test results for contacts with foreigners through CMC (where 1—strongly agree, 2—disagree, 3—no opinion, 4—agree, 5—strongly agree)

Statement	Group	M	SD	t	sig (2-tailed)
Through CMC I seek contact with people from other cultures	Polish	3.17	1.13	1.365	0.174
	Romanian	3.43	1.10		
I have made friends with foreigners through CMC	Polish	2.74	1.28	3.250	0.001
	Romanian	3.43	1.16		
I find interacting with people from other cultures interesting	Polish	4.26	0.86	-0.308	0.758
	Romanian	4.22	0.81		

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and *t*-test results for statements concerning openness to other cultures through CMC experience (where 1—strongly agree, 2—disagree, 3—no opinion, 4—agree, 5—strongly agree)

Statement	Group	M	SD	t	sig (2-tailed)
My attitudes toward other cultures are more positive thanks to CMC	Polish	3.47	0.94	1.682	0.094
	Romanian	3.74	0.97		
CMC helps me understand other cultures	Polish	3.50	0.94	1.642	0.102
	Romanian	3.76	0.97		
Through CMC I become more open to other cultures	Polish	3.58	0.94	0.593	0.554
	Romanian	3.67	1.03		
Through CMC I notice differences between people from different cultures	Polish	3.55	0.96	3.164	0.002
	Romanian	4.04	0.78		

In Tables 1, 2, and 3 descriptive statistics and statistical significance levels for participants' answers to Likert-type statements which focused on their perceptions of intercultural experience through CMC are presented.

The mean values for the participants' declared answers indicate that the Romanian students expressed more positive opinions about seeking contacts with people

Table 3 Descriptive statistics and *t*-test results for statements concerning the cultural and language knowledge dimension in CMC (where 1—strongly agree, 2—disagree, 3—no opinion, 4—agree, 5—strongly agree)

Statement	Group	M	SD	t	sig (2-tailed)
CMC helps me gain information about other cultures	Polish	3.95	0.86	2.286	0.023
	Romanian	4.26	0.64		
Through CMC I learn how people live in other countries	Polish	3.80	0.86	1.412	0.160
	Romanian	4.00	0.78		
CMC is a source of authentic English, which has high cultural value	Polish	3.74	1.01	-1.513	0.132
	Romanian	3.48	1.02		
My English improves through CMC	Polish	3.87	0.94	1.139	0.256
	Romanian	4.04	0.84		
In CMC I share information about my own country	Polish	3.27	1.03	3.497	0.001
	Romanian	3.87	0.95		

from other cultures or even having established intercultural friendships through CMC (for this statement, statistically significant differences between the groups were recorded, $p = 0.001$). The high standard deviation levels, however, point to considerable variation among the participants. Both groups appeared to agree or strongly agree that interacting with people from different cultural background was an interesting experience for them.

As shown in Table 2, although for most of the statements, the between-group differences were not statistically significant, the Romanian students expressed more agreement with the statement concerning the positive influence of CMC on their attitudes toward other cultures, and agreed more with the statements that engaging in CMC contributes to a better understanding of and more openness to other cultures. The Romanian students also marked more positive answers indicating that while communicating online, they noticed cultural differences.

As the data in Table 3 show, while both groups indicated CMC as a vital source of information about other cultures, the Romanian students agreed more with this statement. The difference between the two groups is statistically significant ($p = 0.023$), and the Romanian group's lower standard deviation level points to a greater uniformity within this group. Similarly, the participants seemed to agree that through CMC they learn about lifestyles in other cultures, with the differences between the groups being minimal. The Polish group seemed to agree more with the statement that encountering authentic English through CMC has a cultural value, while the Romanians appeared to appreciate the positive influence of CMC on their proficiency in English more. Finally, the Romanian students admitted to sharing information about their own country more than the Polish students.

In the final section of the questionnaire, the participants were invited to provide their own comments on the usefulness of the Internet as a source of cultural information and as a scene of intercultural exchanges. Only 15 comments were made, nine by the Romanian students and six by the Polish ones. All of the

comments expressed positive opinions about the benefits of the Internet for their linguistic and intercultural development.

Some of the students stressed the value of the Internet as a source of cultural information through its offering interesting websites, access to online media, and intercultural interaction opportunities. The following quotations illustrate this point: "When using the Internet, I gain knowledge about other cultures (through literature, films, games and interaction) to a large extent. Moreover, I gain knowledge about other topics connected with my subject of study, although to a lesser degree"; "I rarely interact with people, I do, however, enjoy reading the remarks that they leave. I think in this way I learn a lot about foreign cultures"; "I appreciate the fact that I learn so many things about other countries, e.g. their traditions, food, clothes, etc. I learn a lot from watching English and American t.v. series".

Another group of comments stressed the nature of their interpersonal contacts through CMC, as in this example: "I initiate a lot of contacts with native speakers of English by playing games and connecting with them on their kinds of sites. Later, I chat with some of them through other media (Facebook, IM, email). In this way, I get closer to their culture". One Romanian student wrote, "I'm not sure if I learn something about other cultures because what people say in CMC may not be true. They may pretend to be completely different". Another student emphasized that CMC was more suitable for maintaining old relationships rather than making new friends: "I don't really seek new contacts with foreigners through CMC, but it helps me maintain contacts with the people I already know". Some students also highlighted the relevance of the topics discussed with other Internet users: "I have managed to talk to students from other countries and thanks to it I know how studies are organized there".

Some of the comments underscored the dimension of developing a deeper intercultural understanding through engaging in online interactions, for example, the following ones: "Through the Internet I am connected to other cultures. CMC helps me to better understand other cultures and become more open to them"; "With the help of the Internet you can connect to people from different countries and learn about their cultures. For example, I have spoken to a teacher from Egypt and this helped me to understand more their culture, habits, their deep appreciation of every aspect of life. We talk about the nature of relationships, such as friendship and family relationships, in our countries".

Other comments concerned the additional value of engaging in intercultural CMC for their linguistic development, as highlighted in these examples: "For me, the Internet is a great source of authentic English, which I don't have a chance to encounter otherwise"; "Through Internet conversations with foreigners I'm able to practice my English and to expand my knowledge about other ways of living"; "Thanks to CMC I practice so many different skills, such as writing and speaking in English (e.g. through Skype), but I also get closer to other cultures"; "It's interesting to notice that on the Internet native speakers use a lot of slang and do not pay attention to mistakes. Their grammar is very often incorrect".

6 Discussion

The participants of the study, Polish and Romanian students of English, reported frequently engaging in CMC in English, the most popular forms being emails, instant messaging and social networking sites. Such an intensive and, as one may assume, relevant and meaning-oriented beyond-the-class contact with the target language offers considerable potential in terms of language learning by providing both exposure to language and opportunities for intercultural interaction. Moreover, technology may have the power to stimulate in young people the urge to develop life-long learning skills, which “develop a global mind and intercultural skills in a self-managed and goal-directed process” (Sercu 2010: 21). Generally, the participants expressed openness toward intercultural online exchanges, indicating that interacting with foreigners was interesting to them, which can be interpreted as an indicator of the potential for developing intercultural competence and of intercultural awareness being stimulated through engagement in CMC.

However, although both groups of study participants indicated positive attitudes toward other cultures and enhanced intercultural understanding as a result of engaging in CMC, the Romanian students’ attitudes toward intercultural online interactions were consistently more positive. In light of other study findings, which indicated considerably less visit-abroad experience by the Romanian students, perhaps their greater appreciation of intercultural contacts online may be interpreted as some form of compensation for their more limited opportunities for direct intercultural contact.

The results of the study, both the answers to the closed-ended questions and the open-ended comments provided by the participants, point to the value of the Internet as a source of cultural information. The participants declared discovering information about how people live in other countries, and about the values and beliefs expressed by foreigners. Although this dimension of becoming interculturally competent may appear to be rather superficial, as obviously cultural knowledge alone does not lead to intercultural competence, knowledge about other cultures may lead individuals to explore different worldviews, reflect upon their own culture, and may contribute to a better understanding of culture-related behaviors. It can be argued that for learners of a foreign language who do not have a systematic direct contact with the L2 culture or have never even visited the target language country, knowledge about certain cultural phenomena, lifestyles, values, or family relationships, may be a vital initial step in arousing interest in these and other cultures. In addition to noticing cultural differences, the acquisition of knowledge may also be an important step toward developing intercultural understanding and sensitivity.

Another point highlighted by the study was the linguistic dimension of online intercultural contact. Even if at such a high level of proficiency in English their competence may not visibly improve through CMC contexts, the cultural value of these linguistic experiences appears to be considerable. Online language use is very often specific, as it is adjusted to the specific situation of online interactions. By

becoming familiar with or reflecting upon such language use, learners of English as a foreign language become aware of linguistic processes in specific discourse communities—they therefore acquire valuable hands-on experience with the cultural reality of authentic language use. Students gain exposure to certain linguistic and cultural norms and conventions typical of online spaces. Moreover, interacting with others in an L2 on topics of mutual interest (e.g. student life or online gaming) also has the potential to stimulate authentic language use and cultural awareness.

Although the study results shed light on the potential benefits of computer-enhanced technology for intercultural experience, it needs to be noted that even if the participants' contact with other cultures was considerably increased through CMC, "intercultural contact in and of itself does not necessarily lead to cultural understanding" (Kern 2011: 207). Intercultural contact needs to be supported by specific skills and predispositions in order to contribute to one's intercultural awareness.

Hence, the study leads to certain practical implications. In order to be effective, beyond-the-class intercultural experience needs to be supported by classroom-based training in the form of discussions, brainstorming, or awareness-raising activities, about what intercultural competence is and why it is important. In this way, learners can conceptualize intercultural competence in a broader sense, and not focus entirely on the cognitive dimension of the concept. Moreover, their valid beyond-the-classroom linguistic and cultural experience may be enhanced by training in metacognitive and cognitive strategies that can be used while interacting online.

Conclusions and Limitations

The study had several limitations. Some of them resulted from the fact that it relied exclusively on self-reported data, in which the reliability of the responses can be questioned. Apart from that, the questionnaire format allowed for limited depth of insight into the reported data. Finally, the study highlighted only the potential of computer-enhanced environments for the development of intercultural awareness, rather than measuring the actual development of intercultural competence.

However, despite these limitations, the study findings allow for the formulation of some conclusions concerning the benefits of CMC for enhancing intercultural contacts and fostering intercultural understanding and sensitivity in advanced learners of English. The results suggest that CMC experience can, at least to a certain extent, compensate for insufficient intercultural experience through direct contact. They also point to a heightened curiosity about other cultures, a better ability to notice cultural differences, and in general, a higher level of intercultural openness and understanding as a result of participating in online environments. These are important elements of foreign language education and valid traits that help prepare learners for the challenges of lifelong learning in the contemporary world.

Appendix

Dear Students, I will be grateful for your filling in the questionnaire below. It serves research purposes and is anonymous. Thanks!

Sex: Male/Female

Age: years

Nationality:

How long have you been learning English? years

1. How many foreign countries have you visited in your life?

- (a) none
- (b) 1–2
- (c) 3–5
- (d) more than 5

2. How many times have you been to English-speaking countries?

- (a) never
- (b) 1–2 times
- (c) 3–5 times
- (d) more than 5 times

3. Do you have steady access to the Internet? Yes/No

4. Do you mainly use the Internet

- (a) at home
- (b) at university
- (c) at other places (e.g. Internet cafes)

Note: CMC is “communication between humans that is mediated by computer technology” (Levy and Stockwell 2006: 24)

5. How much time on average do you spend on computer-mediated communication (CMC)?

..... hours a day on weekdays

..... hours a day at weekends

6. Do you use the following forms of computer-mediated communication? If you do, in which language(s) do you communicate in these ways? *Tick the ones that you use and the language of communication*

CMC form	In L1	In English	Another language?
Email			
Blogs			
Discussion forums			
Chats			
Wikis			
Instant messaging			
Social networking sites			
Virtual worlds			
Skype			
Other:			

7. How many times a week do you take part in CMC?

- (a) less than once a week
- (b) once a week
- (c) 2–3 times a week
- (d) more than 3 times a week
- (e) every day

8. How often do you use English while engaging in CMC?

Never—Rarely—Sometimes—Often—Very often

9. Please choose the best-matching answer to the questions below:

How often do you use the Internet to:	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
a. read the literature of English-speaking countries (in English)					
b. watch movies in English					
c. read magazines in English					
d. read newspapers in English					
e. listen to the radio in English					
f. watch English tv programs					
g. gain knowledge about works of art from the culture of English-speaking countries					
h. gain knowledge about places of interest in English-speaking countries					
i. interact online with native speakers of English					
j. interact online in English with other non-native speakers of English					

10. Please mark the best-matching answers to the following statements according to the following key:

1—I strongly disagree, 2—I disagree, 3—I have no opinion, 4—I agree, 5—I strongly agree.

1.	Through CMC I seek contacts with people from other countries	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I have made friends with foreigners through CMC	1	2	3	4	5
3.	My attitudes toward other cultures are more positive thanks to CMC	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I find interacting with people from other cultures interesting	1	2	3	4	5
5.	CMC helps me understand other cultures	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Through CMC I become more open to other cultures	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Through CMC I notice differences between people from different cultures	1	2	3	4	5
8.	CMC helps me gain information about other cultures	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Through CMC I learn about how people live in other countries	1	2	3	4	5
10.	CMC is a source of authentic English, which has high cultural value	1	2	3	4	5
11.	My English improves through CMC	1	2	3	4	5
12.	In CMC I share information about my own country	1	2	3	4	5

11. If you have any comments concerning your Internet contact with the culture of English-speaking countries or CMC contact with people from other cultures, please write them here:

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